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Current Critical Theory and the Period Course (NECEA Conference)

After all the literary skirmishes and counter-skirmishes of the last several years, I step forward to face an audience such as this with trepidation. If I took seriously some of the articles that have recently appeared I should have to be quite self-conscious. For at the worst, I should appear as a false prophet, such as purported to be as ravening wolves; at the most charitable interpretation, I should be a lost sheep, whose fleece was obviously of sable hue. But I do not take these articles very seriously, and I dare say that few of you take them very seriously either. Those who put a gun to your head and ask: "Do you believe in teaching criticism or literary history? Answer yes or no," make the same rhetorical gesture as the man who wants a yes-or-no answer as to whether you have stopped beating your wife. The question is badly asked.

But your program committee has been tactful enough not to put our topic of the morning as a question, and has certainly not demanded a yes-or-no answer. It has suggested that I be brief and that I be as specific as possible. Indeed one of the members proposed that in the interest of concreteness, I ought to use a definite example. Suppose, he put it to me, you were teaching a course in eighteenth century. How would you go about it? How much attention would you give to criticism? How much to biography and historical considerations? Much? Little? Or none at all?

I think that this is a fair proposal and I intend to make use of it, though I shall have to ask you to remember the limitations of a brief paper. Obviously I shall not have time to outline a full course even if that were desirable. I think too that I should say in passing that this question is for me an extremely hypothetical one. I have never taught a course in the eighteenth century in my life.

If I were giving a course in the eighteenth century, I cannot say that would make it 40% literary history & 60%. That would depend a great deal upon the class—upon how well they were trained to read, for example. A class that did not know how to read literature, for example, might have to be taught if they were to be given a course in literary history. But I shall not deal in percentages in any case. One cannot solve the problem by weighing out so many pounds to scholarship to so many pounds of criticism. The relationship is not a me-

chanical one. Suffice it to say that my proposed course would make use of a great deal of biography and of the history of ideas, manners, and taste. But I think that I can best present what I want to say through treatment of a particular poem.

How would I go about teaching Blake's Song "My silks and fine array" from his *Poetical Sketches*? It is a special case, granted, but I choose it because it is short and because here the problems of criticism and scholarship are intimately related.

SONG

My silks and fine array,
My smiles and languish'd air,
By love are driv'n away;
And mournful lean Despair
Brings me yew to deck my grave:
Such end true lovers have.

His face is fair as heav'n
When springing buds unfold
O why to him was't giv'n
Whose heart is wintry cold?
His breast is love's all worship'd tomb,
Where all love's pilgrims come.

Bring me an axe and spade,
Bring me a winding sheet;
When I my grave have made
Let winds and tempests beat:
Then down I'll lie as cold as clay.
True love doth pass away!

The problem to be solved is a double one: not only to show the Elizabethan quality of the poem (which has frequently been remarked), but to have the student participate in the poem. I do not think that in this instance the

two problems can be separated. If we try to prove the Elizabethan quality solely by statistical methods, we shall end up with few examples of Elizabethan diction and with a handful of rather empty conventions to which we have pointed rather abstractly. If, on the other hand, we try to teach this poem apart from its Elizabethan references, we shall not be able to render it fully intelligible—much less make it live as a poem.

For example, the student—either the bright student or the quite stupid student—may demand to know why the despairing young lady calls for "an axe and spade." Since she intends to dig a grave, the spade is accounted for. But why the axe? For the twentieth century student, the latter instrument, with its smack of Lizzie Borden, may argue that the young lady in her distraction means to make a direct and violent assault upon her lover's wintry heart, "love's all worshipped tomb," before she drapes the winding sheet about her limbs.

The bright student may also want to question the second line. Why does the lady say that love has driven away her "smiles and languished air"? Unrequited love ought to give her a languished air, not drive it away. Or is the lady after all a kind of Lydia Languish whose melancholy has been a pose?

And lastly, how justify the sequence of the action in stanza three? The lady will dig her grave; then "Let winds and tempests beat"; curiously enough, it is only after the storm has spent itself—at least it is only after the mention of

the storm, that she says "Then down I'll lie as cold as clay." Should not the tempests, indeed, do its worst after she has become cold as clay in the grave? The logic of the sequence is untidy—not to mention the contemplated action itself, the lying down in the rain-filled grave.

But I have come to praise the poem, not to bury it along with its heroine in a muddy grave. The poem triumphs over its apparent difficulties. Yet if they are only apparent, why raise them at all? Sufficient unto the class-session the difficulties thereof. Why go out to meet the difficulties? Why, indeed? I am as timorous as anyone in these matters; and yet, the difficulties in this poem are essential to an understanding of the poem—and to an understanding of Blake's relation to neoclassic poetry and to the Elizabethan poetry that attracted him.

The Elizabethan influence shows itself, of course, in other eighteenth century poets. William Collins, for example, uses Elizabethan materials charmingly and, I might add, quite tidily. Here is how he treats Fidele's "grassy tomb" in his "Dirge from Cymbeline."

The Redbreast oft at Ev'ning Hours
Shall kindly lend his little Aid,
With hoary moss, and gather'd
Flow'r's,
To deck the Ground where thou art
laid.

When howling Winds, and beating
Rain,
In Tempests shake the sylvan Cells:
Or midst the chace on ev'ry Plain,
The tender Thought on thee shall
dwell.

Collins' treatment has its own merit: I shall not go into it here. Suffice it to say that it is not Blake's.

If the Elizabethan influence as such will not account for Blake's treatment, the situation, of course, certainly will not. Here is Goldsmith's treatment of a related situation:

The only art her guilt to cover,
To hide her shame from every eye,
To give repentance to her lover,
And wring his bosom—is to die.

Goldsmith's lovely woman, like Blake's, will find death if she returns to her lover's "wintry heart." But Goldsmith obviously is working in a very different mode: his account is more realistic—more immediately related to contemporary bourgeois mores. The lady has been betrayed;

Continued on page 5

ANNUAL CEA MEETING

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Presiding, William W. Watt

(Further details in later issues of THE CEA CRITIC)

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An Assignment In Freshman English

Three of the most widely used types of assignment in Freshman English are 1) the theme based on personal experience, 2) the theme based on reading essays, short stories, poems, plays, novels, etc., and 3) the theme based on current events of political, economic, or social significance. Each of these types of assignment has its virtues and its drawbacks. The theme of personal experience frequently disintegrates into loose and unconnected first person narrative. The theme based on reading frequently disintegrates into unwise presentation of ill-digested opinions from secondary sources. The theme based on current events frequently disintegrates into mere prejudice and emotional opinion. On the other hand, each of these types of assignment can and does produce first rate themes.

This past semester, an opportunity arose for several of our staff to make a theme assignment which incorporated all three of the above-mentioned types; the results were so astonishing (the themes qua themes were no better written than they would have been on any other assignment) in terms of student interest that the assignment appears to have had more than ordinary educational value.

The idea grew out of the exhibition in our University museum of two collections of paintings. One exhibit consisted of paintings from the permanent collection of the museum mostly traditional and highly representational paintings: landscape, portraits, etc. The second exhibit consisted of paintings by Francis Colburn, professor of painting and artist in residence at the University; Colburn's paintings involve considerable use of abstraction, symbolism, and non-representational techniques; his paintings represented for the students "Modern Art."

Our students were told to visit the exhibitions, to examine closely the paintings of each, to try to determine the effect that certain paintings had upon them. They were specifically warned against attempting to criticize the paintings before, and besides that the assignment was not meant to elicit art criticism; it was designed to expand the experience of these students by introducing them to an area of human thought and activity with which they were, for the most part, completely unfamiliar.

We knew, of course, that generally the paintings of the traditional school would have much more appeal for the students than those of Colburn. It was perhaps natural that they should like a

landscape of a lake and mountains; most of them at this University have grown up in such locales. To provide some basis for an approach to Colburn's paintings, we told the students that after they had visited the exhibit they were to read "Why Abstract?" by Hilaire Hiler (in *Readings For Liberal Education*, the anthology used in the course). After reading this essay, the students were to re-visit the exhibitions for a second look at the paintings, and then they were to write a theme in which they incorporated their responses to the paintings.

As might be expected, the themes ranged from rather careful discussions of single paintings, through comparisons and contrasts of two or more paintings, to blanket considerations of both exhibits. In the symbolic paintings of Colburn, many students found a basis for discussing current affairs, political, economic, and social. Though their comments were frequently fantastic, some students saw dimly the relationship between art and propaganda. By and large, the students confronted their inadequacy to cope with art on the aesthetic level with commendable honesty.

Many were sorely troubled and confused. They felt that there had to be something to "Modern Art" (else why would the University have a painter like Colburn around anyway?). In short, the assignment produced exactly the effects hoped for, the pained confusion that lays the basis for a willingness to learn more about a subject.

The next steps in the assignment were the most important. All the themes were read by Professor Colburn (whose experience in teaching painting has made him well acquainted with just the type of problem raised by our students). Then he met with the classes in the museum to discuss their problems and the paintings which had pointed up those problems. The discussion period was, we felt, extremely fruitful. Without grinding any particular critical axe, Colburn was able to clarify a great many questions. Students who had never before known anything about this area of activity (and conceivably might have finished college without ever finding out) had had what we like to think was a vital and stimulating experience. Not the least important result of the assignment was the fact that these students actually went into the museum, a building not visited by every undergraduate!

The extent to which this assignment affected our students was in some degree measurable on the final examination last week. One of the topics offered for a theme

involved the student's evaluation of his first semester's experience in college. We were astonished at the number (about half) of students who specifically mentioned the "art assignment" as their most memorable and most educational experience of their first semester in college.

Of course, not every campus is fortunate enough to have a museum; surely, however, paintings of one sort or another are available somewhere on almost every college campus. A professional artist and teacher of painting like Francis Colburn would be hard to duplicate anywhere, but again surely every college can produce some person who knows enough about art to clarify such problems as are raised by such an assignment.

This assignment blended together the theme of personal experience, the theme based on reading, and the theme of current significance. For us it was one of our most warmly satisfying teaching experiences. Samuel N. Bogorad

University of Vermont

(Editor's Note: The summer European project which the national CEA secretary carried out on behalf of the general Headquarters of the International Student Service (Geneva, Switzerland) took him, as observer, to four international university seminars with which the ISS was more or less immediately involved. The last was the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies, at Schloss Leopoldskron. Here he met Joseph Warren Beach, national CEA vice president, and Mrs. Beach. The article on the following page is a result.)

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The Salzburg Seminar

During the year 1947 an interesting idea took shape in the minds of a few Harvard Students—to provide a center of instruction in Europe for foreign students of all nationalities, manned by competent scholars from American universities. The disorganization of teaching in Europe was at that time so great, the want of knowledge of American institutions and culture so deep and widespread, that such a school was greatly needed. It would provide a meeting place for men and women of good will from many races and two hemispheres, an occasion for exchanging ideas and information that might be infinitely helpful in promoting mutual understanding. Under the circumstances of that post-war period it would even provide much-needed shelter for European scholars who were for the time being without means of subsistence. Thus originated the idea of the American Seminar in Europe.

The men who conceived this idea did not know at the start how this Seminar was to be financed, nor where it might be lodged, nor what scholars might be procured to conduct the courses. In the beginning, one hears, they met with much misunderstanding and opposition on the part of influential people who fancied they saw in this project some danger to American interests or American ideals. But this was not sufficient to prevent certain distinguished American scholars from seeing its great possibilities for good and offering their services. And many generous donors were found to supply the funds necessary for the first year's session. The problem of a home and location for the Seminar was solved by a happy accident, when one of the Harvard committee met with Helene Thimig, the well-known actress and

theatrical director and widow of Max Reinhardt, and learned that the spacious Chateau in Salzburg of which she is the owner was unoccupied and available for this purpose. A summer session was actually arranged for 1947, and since that time such sessions have been held every year and more recently sessions in the winter and spring. A band of devoted students and professors, with changing personnel from year to year, have been steadily at work in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and other university centers arranging for the curriculum, the selection of the student body, the building of a library, and the never-ending problem of supplying funds. And at the Schloss Leopoldskron in Salzburg, American professors are most happy to give their services free, and a staff of American students freely perform the arduous tasks of managing, provisioning and generally keeping in good running order a household of considerably over a hundred souls.

As one of those lucky enough to participate in the summer session of 1950, I can testify to the extraordinary success of the Salzburg Seminar as an educational institution and an agency of international good will. I can say without exaggeration that it was the best six weeks I have ever known in a teaching career of fifty years.

Schloss Leopoldskron is an ideal home for such an institution. It is a spacious early-eighteenth century palace built by the Archbishop of Salzburg, and with many engaging, if somewhat florid, decorative features added by Max Reinhardt during the period of his occupation. It stands in a handsome park looking across its lake to a chain of mountains and backward to the frowning medieval castle, the "Festung" of Salzburg.

Here and in the adjoining Meyerhof nearly a hundred students are lodged dormitory-wise and boarded in the great second-floor dining hall. This summer they were drawn from more than a dozen western European countries. They were all of advanced graduate standing and individually picked after careful consultation with them and those acquainted with their work. No examinations are taken and no certificates conferred, but there is close association between student and teacher. This summer each student attended lectures in one or more chosen subjects, and made a report on some research topic in one of the Seminars. There were nine professors, mostly known to the European students for their publications, drawn from the universities of Colorado, Duke, Harvard, Kansas, Minnesota, Princeton, Howard, Rochester and Yale, and from Bennington and Smith Colleges. The subjects taught were illustrative of American institutions, culture and methods of study—including Art, Economics, Government, Literature, Philosophy, Psychology, and Sociology. A

special course in spoken English was open to those who needed it. The physical sciences could not be included for lack of laboratory equipment. As it stands, the Seminar is an American School of Humanistic Studies.

For the most part these European students were eager to hear about the latest developments in American scholarship. In my own seminar in American poetry, brilliant critical studies were presented on, for example, E. A. Robinson (by a Frenchman), Hart Crane (by a Norwegian), Sandburg (by an Austrian), Eliot (by a German woman), and on the general aesthetics of poetry by an Italian high school teacher and an English woman from South Africa. With topics of this kind it was hardly necessary even to raise the question of whether there is such a thing as American "culture."

The extra-curricular activities were as important for the larger aim of the Seminar as the class work. Those included the talk that went on incessantly between students and faculty and between students of differing nationality. Many close friendships were formed across the barriers of age, race, and professional interest. There were also volleyball, ping-pong and other sports; and a students' committee organized a series of evening entertainments which included dances, concerts and poetry readings, and a considerable number of "forums"; concerned mainly with the national problems of the several groups and the general problem of European unity and self-preservation. Naturally the events in Korea gave a special sharpness to the ever-present concern of these European students with the threat from the East.

The most extraordinary feature of the entire Seminar was the objectivity—the philosophic temper, without animosity—with which were canvassed controversial questions in which so much of personal feeling might have been involved. Even the problem of academic freedom in the United States was discussed with a dispassionateness, a concern for facts and principles, which were a credit to both the Europeans and Americans who took part.

The Seminar has every likelihood of being a continuing project, and is on a more permanent basis now than ever before—with a standing committee of professors and a business director in the States and a paid director in residence at Leopoldskron. It has, we believe, an excellent reputation among serious European scholars. It will continue to require the generosity of American donors who have imaginations enough to realize the great value it may have in the promotion of good understanding among nations. It must also depend on the devotion of American scholars likewise aware of its potential importance.

Only persons of real distinction and approved capacity as teachers can meet the exigent demands of the men and women who come there from European countries to enlarge their acquaintance with American institutions and to exchange ideas with their professors on a high level of common knowledge and philosophical competence. One thing is clear, that any American scholar who participates in these programs stands to gain as much from them as he has to give. In these close personal contacts he may well learn more of the mind of Europe than he had from a life of reading at a distance. He may even cherish the hope that, in the process of discussing American ways with those young Europeans, he may have done something to confirm the ideals which we have in common with them and have served a useful purpose in regard to world culture. Among the members of the Salzburg Seminar are men and women who are destined to be leaders in the intellectual life of their countries—leaders even in the reconstruction and recovery of Europe.

The American professors who go there from Colorado or Connecticut are not so simple as to think they have the answers to the long-standing problems of history. But it is not impossible to imagine that this simple course of studies concerned with the new world—this candid exchange of views between American and foreign scholars—might have, in the long run, an appreciable and constructive influence in the world of desperate hopes and troubled aspirations that is present-day Europe.

JOSEPH WARREN BEACH
University of Illinois

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Comments

(Following NECEA papers by
Dorothy Bethurum and
Cleanth Brooks)

Let me try briefly to restate the three main points which I made at the start of the discussion.

1. That the term "New Criticism" as it is being used today is an unfortunate question-begging epithet. (It is relevant to say that I was prompted to make this point as much by the free use of the term in President Morse S. Allen's introductory remarks as by the tenor of Miss Bethurum's paper.) I pointed out that twenty to forty years ago the same term meant roughly the criticism inspired by Crocean expressionism. (The anthology entitled *The New Criticism* and edited by Edwin B. Burgum as late as 1930 included such diverse theorists as Spingarn, Santayana, Richards, Fernandez, Parker, Eliot, and Spengler.) The current use of the term appears to be due largely to the unhappy title *The New Criticism* chosen by Mr. Ransom for a book, published in 1941, in which he treats with varying degrees of skeptical friendliness I. A. Richards as "psychological critic," T. S. Eliot as "historical critic," and Yvor Winters as "moral critic." In the last chapter Mr. Ransom presents his own theory as "ontological critic." I called attention to the radical difference between this theory (with its Freudian development by Mr. Ransom in the *Kenyon Review*, 1947) and the theories of certain other living critics, notably Mr. Brooks. There is no stereotyped coterie or school of "New" critics. The word "new" in this context has properly but a chronological meaning. The important issue is not whether we are interested in "new" critics, but whether we are

interested in critics and criticism. Criticism I defined as a way of treating literature which is calculated to help us say whether a given work is good or bad — a method such as Mr. Brooks had just illustrated in making an evaluative comparison between a poem by Blake and one by Goldsmith or Percy.

2. That anti-intentionalism in criticism is not a theory that poems come into existence by accident. To prefer as critical evidence the poem itself to the supposed intention of the author or his intention as indicated externally to the poem (in letters for instance) is the way of objective criticism — but by this doctrine the anti-intentionalist certainly need not imply that a poem comes into existence without the intending and designing intellect of the author (as Miss Bethurum seemed to believe). Like Mr. Stoll, who says that the words of a poem come out of a head, not out of a hat, I myself would insist on being teleological and inferring from a poem the activity of an author. But that is a dimension of thought different from literary criticism. What the anti-intentional doctrine in criticism means is that the author's intention, except as manifest in the poem itself, is not available as a criterion for judging the poem. The intention as part of the author's consciousness (his plans, his inspiration, his experience) is inferred from the poem itself (or, in ways which may not coincide with the poem, from external evidence), and to discover this intention or inspiration and talk about it is an activity different from criticism — it is biography. Mr. Monroe Beardsley and I have labored this thesis at some length in the *Sewanee Review* for Autumn, 1946.

3. That historical intentionalism if consistently applied will lead to clearly anti-critical results. Two examples chosen by Miss Bethurum, Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* and *House of Fame*, were convenient for illustrating this point. Miss Bethurum confessed to a difficulty in seeing how either of these poems is organized on an adequate principle of unity. But she looked to historical discoveries, especially in the field of medieval aesthetics, for the ultimate vindication of the poems. To me also it seemed that the architecture of these poems, especially the *House of Fame*, is doubtful, but I was more inclined to think that historical research of the right kind may only confirm their inferiority to Chaucer's masterpieces. A critical student, I suggested, is one who stands prepared, in the last analysis and after adequate historical study, to pronounce a given poem (even one written by a great poet) defective in some respects or even generally inferior. A purely historical scholar (if he exists) is one who stands prepared in the last analysis to shape

I've Been Reading

J. GORDON EAKER, Literary Editor
217 Audley St., So. Orange, N. J.

The Dartmouth Bible. Edited by Roy B. Chamberlin and Herman Feldman. Boston. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1950. Pp. xxxviii + 1257.

Whenever the Bible is taught in great books courses or in world literature courses, the problem of providing a readable, attractive text, together with enough historical and literary information to give the various books of the Bible intelligible context, is always a difficult one. Too often the professor uses valuable time in supplying background, time more profitably spent in the study and discussion of the Bible itself.

In skillfully abridging the King James Version of the Bible, and in providing introductory essays, explanatory notes, and an index, the editors of *The Dartmouth Bible* have produced a volume which admirably meets an urgent need. The format is attractive, the notes are helpful without being burdensome, and the historical introductions bring together material that to my knowledge is nowhere else available in such concise form. Best of all, from the point of view of the teacher of the humanities, the comments on the literary qualities of the various books of the Bible show real perception and endeavor to indicate the imaginative, ethical, and spiritual meaning of the Bible as literature.

Granted that the editors hold religious positions not shared by all who may use this book, one must admire their attempt to state the divergent conclusions on crucial problems of exegesis. If their work did no more than to encourage others to attempt similar editions to fulfill different needs, they would have made a great

contribution.

The new *Dartmouth Bible* should be welcomed by the increasing number of colleges and universities which refuse to acquiesce in Biblical illiteracy on the part of students who are supposedly being liberally educated. If we believe in the importance of liberal or general education, if we believe that students should enter into the heritage of the past in order that this heritage may become living and operative in the present, then we can not be satisfied to teach the Greek classics, for example, while the great Hebrew and the earliest Christian classics are neglected. For however much more one may claim for Sacred Scripture, much of it is surely great literature. Furthermore, as all teachers of literature are aware, and as Professor Walter Clark of Middlebury College demonstrated in a recent article on "The Bible in the Colleges," [Bulletin, American Association of University Professors, Autumn, 1949] ignorance of this great literature on the part of college students is profound.

With the publication of *The Dartmouth Bible* it should be much easier to pursue the study of the Bible in colleges and universities throughout the country. The day might then be not too far distant when to the question, "Who baptized Jesus?" Professor Clark might receive a better response than the following: "A rabbi in Mazarine baptized Jesus."

Alvan S. Ryan

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Critical Theory . . .*Continued from page 1*

she is oppressed by guilt; her sense of shame is emphasized; the return to love's all-worshipped tomb is not really to be thought of. Again I do not mean to disparage Goldsmith's little poem, it too has its merits. I simply point out how far it is in tone from Blake's.

I want to return to the term "languish'd." Blake knew, of course, the normal use of languished and used the word normally in another of his *Poetical Sketches*, the song "To Spring": he refers to the "languish'd head" of "our love-sick land that mourns" for Spring. But Blake here is not like Humpty Dumpty, altering language to suit himself. He has some warrant for the present use of the term. The Oxford Dictionary indicates that "languish"—earliest instance dated 1714—could mean "To assume a languid look or expression, as an indication of sorrowful or tender emotion." Blake's poetic strategy thus emerges: his lady whose coquettish languor goes with silks and smiles has, now that she is really in love, put aside her pretended languor to languish in earnest—to the death. (If you feel that I make too much of the play on meanings here, try reading the second lines as "My smiles and jocund air.")

But the languishment in earnest is neither a numbed sinking into lifelessness nor an incoherent outcry of grief. It has the set steps of an almost ritual performance. The lady rehearses them in anticipation; she will become love's pilgrim, she will make her pilgrimage to the holiest shrine, "love's all-worshipped tomb," which is her lover's wintry heart. There love lies buried, killed, presumably, by her lover's coldness. But having journeyed there, having paid her devotions to love's tomb,

nothing remains for the pilgrim except to die, and she duly makes preparations for her grave. One is tempted to take her defiance of the elements as more than half addressed to her lover. True, as insensible clay, she will not feel the pelting of the physical elements. But her lover's heart is "wintry cold," and it would be appropriate if the "winds and tempests" to which she is resigned should issue from that source. But if her lover rejects her now, her preparations are made: "Then down I'll lie as cold as clay."

I referred to this as a kind of ritual, and I think that it is plain that the lady herself sees it as such. The first stanza ends with "Such end true lovers have," and in the second stanza she says that love's tomb is "Where all love's pilgrims come." But the most telling corroboration lies in the tone of the third stanza where the actions contemplated are treated as if they were known and recognized gestures.

Blake, it is plain, is making use of a set of Elizabethan conventions—deliberately, as it were, playing his poem off of the conventions. But how present to the student those Elizabethan conventions? How give him the structure of the ritual upon which an understanding of the tone of the poem depends?

As one casts about for appropriate texts, I suppose that the grave-digger's song in Hamlet will occur to almost everyone:

A pickaxe, and a spade, a spade,
For — and a shrouding sheet:
O, a pit of clay for to be made,
For such a guest is meet.

The ax for which the lady cries, in the light of the context, resolves itself into a pickaxe — no news surely to this audience — but the passage is useful in order to justify to the student Blake's clipped form. Blake is depending, consciously or unconsciously, upon a known context and a familiar association.

The grave-digger's song is, of course, a reminiscence of Lord Vaux's "The Aged Lover Renounceth Love" which is printed in Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. The lover in Vaux's poem differs from Blake's lady in sex and in age, but he resembles her in renouncing a former mode of behavior:

My lustes they do me leave,
My fansies all are fled;
And tract of time begins to weave,
Gray hairs upon my head.
A pickeax and a spade,
And eke a shrouding shete,
A house of clay for to be made
For such a guest most mete.

But having opened my copy of the *Reliques*, other conventions made use of in Blake's "Song" speedily presented themselves: there was "Gentle Herdsman," in which the lady, dressed as a pilgrim, seeks the grave of her true love who has died because of her cruelty; there was "Walsingham,"

where the pilgrim, this time a man, says, in a phrase reminiscent of the seventh line of Blake's poem, that his cruel mistress is "as the heavens fair"; and lastly there was Percy's little cento, "The Friars of Orders Gray," in which the pilgrim's sad search is given a happy ending. This cento, by the way, which is made up of fragments from Shakespearian plays, incorporates most of Ophelia's song in Hamlet, a song in which the true love motif and the pilgrim motif both occur.

It was evident that in trying to find illustrations of the Elizabethan conventions, I had come upon the very sources of Blake's poem, and, confident that this was true, I was therefore a little disappointed to find that Miss Lowry, in her *Windows of the Morning*, had been before me. Yet on reflection, I am just as happy to have been anticipated. I expect that an audience such as this requires, for full conviction, the kind of evidence that Miss Lowry presents. She is able to tell us that Blake's copy of the *Reliques* is now preserved in the Wellesley College Library. She writes, further, that "The section . . . [of the *Reliques*] given to the ballads associated with Shakespeare has had very hard usage. . . . In Volume I there are numerous emendations in the text of *The Aged Lover Renounceth Love*, done in Blake's handwriting. By the way Blake's phrase "winding sheet" instead of "shrouding sheet," he could have got from one of Percy's footnotes to the poem in the first edition of the *Reliques*, for Percy had collated the Tottel edition of Vaux with a Harleian MS. and had recorded the variants.

So much for Blake's sources. I dare say that we would deal with this poem as "poem" without reference to its sources: we might illustrate in some other way the conventions upon which his poem leans. But when we find the conventions embedded in the sources as here, surely the normal process is to work directly from the poems that Blake almost certainly had in mind. That is what I should do without hesitation.

But why — let me raise the question once more — why are the literary conventions relevant to this poem? What difference do they make? They make a great deal. They have everything to do with the tone. The lady must not seem to protest too much. Her outcry must not seem shrill and hysterical. Nor must her motive for dying at love's tomb seem petulant or archly sentimental. A modern poem will illustrate the danger. Sara Teasdale tucks her lady into her grave and has her indulge in what can only be described as a coy gloating:

When I am dead and over me bright April Shakes out her rain-drenched hair,

Though you should lean above me broken-hearted,
I shall not care.

I shall have peace, as leafy trees are peaceful
When rain bends down the bough;

And I shall be more silent and cold-hearted

Than you are now.

We remain unconvinced that the heroine really wants to be peaceful like a leafy tree: she is enjoying too much in anticipation how miserable he is going to feel.

But the danger — or comparable dangers — can be illustrated from eighteenth-century poetry. Goldsmith's Ballad of "Edwin and Emma" will serve. The lady, disguised as a pilgrim, tells the hermit of her cruelty to her true love:

Till quite dejected with my scorn,
He left me to my pride;
And sought a solitude forlorn,
In secret where he dy'd.

But mine the sorrow, mine the fault,
And with my life shall pay;
I'll seek the solitude he sought
And stretch me where he lay.

And there forlorn despairing hid,
I'll lay me down and die . . .

This is too flat, too little focused: and the happy ending in which the hermit suddenly discloses that he is her Edwin in disguise reveals the plot is as synthetic and specious as the quality of feeling in the poem.

Goldsmith's poem, by the way, as Percy tells us (see the 4th edition of the *Reliques*, I, 264), was suggested by the ballad "Gentle Herdsman" which Percy showed Goldsmith in MS. and which furnished Percy the plan for his own cento, "The Friar of

Continued on page 6

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College Course in Semantics

In the continuing search for better college curricula, teachers — especially teachers of English — are thinking of what may be gained by teaching semantics in some form or other. As it first developed, semantics was the study of changes in the meanings of words; but it became, as the result of modern philosophical and scientific needs, a study of the entire symbolic process. It is now concerned with the interpretation of meaning, with human responses to signs and symbols, with the role of language in human behavior.

A study which is so broad can hardly be new, or independent, or free from controversy. Nor can it escape being over-rated and under-rated. Nor can it be entirely unfamiliar to teachers of English, whose subject is the art of communication — writing, speaking, reading, and listening. These teachers, in the belief that clear writing depends on clear thinking, have usually given some time to analyzing words as the verbal tools of thought. From current semantic theories they may easily assimilate a number of useful ideas and techniques.

Teachers and students should not look to semantic theory, when so much is imponderable or unknown, for either science or dogma. They should, however, learn what the semantic problems are and what at least two schools of semanticists propose. It is important to know that "words" have significance, not in themselves, but as part of a triadic pattern (context) in which they are interrelated with "thoughts" (functions of the nervous system) and "things" (space-time events). It is important to know in what sense words are things (signs) and in what sense they are not things (symbols). It is important to know that language fits the world but loosely.

A person who understands (in detailed form for which space here is lacking) the way language works, should be readier at interpreting what he hears and reads. He should expect ambiguities when a word is used to refer to a thing which changes significantly, or when one word refers to different things, or when different words refer to one thing. In his own thinking he should remember that words vary in their objectivity, literalness, and abstractness; that there are things without corresponding words and words without things; that words may represent entirely hypothetical distinctions and constructions. He should be able to recognize that the uses of words are multiform, ranging from phatic communion to informative-evaluative discourse. He should know that the most important human problems are not just verbal. From semantics he will learn more about "straight thinking" than about "right

feeling," except for the scholarly virtues of humility before the facts, patience, and cooperativeness and for the scholarly vices of quibbling and indecision.

These notions are surely relevant to the study of composition and literature (as they are to the understanding of the self and the world). They may be absorbed into courses of the traditional kind, especially the freshman course in exposition or communications which combines theory and practice in equal amount. Or they may be condensed into a separate one semester course mainly analytical and intended for transfer students at the junior or senior level.

The following techniques have been found useful:

1. Analytical — collecting and analyzing examples of confusion of word and thing, ambiguity, slanting, loose generalization, false analogy; accurate reporting, careful differentiation, instructive analogy, humor by change of context.
2. Constructive — matching the multiple meaning of key words such as "is," "same," and "real"; controlling denotation and connotation through context; metaphor; using various levels of abstraction within a paragraph; comparing and contrasting exactly; exploring an analogy; multiple defining; verbal mapping.

Eleazer Lecky

Univ. of Southern California
(as digested by Dorothy Dixon)

NECEA

About one hundred and fifty participants attended the all-day fall conference of the New England CEA, at Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass., on October 28. The hospitality of the host institution was generous; the program exceptionally rich and rewarding, thanks especially to the efforts of Osborne Earle (Brandeis), chairman of the program committee.

The following officers were elected: Alan McGee (Mount Holyoke), president; Norman Pearson (Yale), first vice president; Osborne Earle (Brandeis), second vice president.

It was voted to accept an invitation to hold the spring meeting at Mount Holyoke College.

Critical Theory ...

Continued from page 5
Orders Gray." Since Blake's "Song" stems from the cluster of poems in the Reliques to which "Gentle Herdsman" and "Walsingham" belong, it is interesting to see how these three eighteenth century figures assimilate the same materials. Blake, unlike Percy and Goldsmith, rejects the happy ending. Unlike Goldsmith, he leaves most of the story to implication; he insists upon the metaphorical element; he refuses to expand and thus to dilute; he keeps the poem centered upon the psychological drama — the lady's change from one mood

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to a very different mood.

Blake is here, as it were, having the grave-digger sing his own song but since he has transformed Shakespeare's rustic with his earthy jest into a silken lady, compensatory balance must be got in some way. Aesthetic distance must be recovered. Blake sets the lady's play at being in love over against another and more serious kind of play. One mode balances, defines, and stabilizes the other. The emotion is submitted to the discipline of form and receives from it an articulation which makes precise and deft, graceful and resonant.

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